

A Diagnosis

Thomas Adams

Thomas Adams is one of our authors about whom very little is known. Neither the date of his birth or death are known. He is first heard of labouring in the rural parish of Willington in 1612, and subsequently in his parish life appeared to have much leisure for writing and making regular visits to London. His works are pithy and lively and were much quoted by men in his day. Southey esteemed Adams as scarcely inferior to Thomas Fuller in wit, and Jeremy Taylor in fancy: his works (chiefly sermons, and an exposition of Peter) were published in 1630, and also reappeared last century. He was sequestered from his living for his loyalty and was passing 'a necessitous and decrepit old age' in London in 1653. He died therefore, before the Restoration.

ERROR

Indeed heresy cannot possess a church, but it gives a subversion to it. 'I may err, a heretic I cannot be,' says Augustine. Furthermore, Tertullian claims that what is diametrically opposed against the truth is heresy, yea, though it be an ancient and long-received custom. A church may be sick of error, and yet live; but heresy (a wilful error against the fundamental truth, violently prosecuted and persisted in) kills it. Therefore heresy is rather death than sickness. When the truth of doctrine, or rather doctrine of truth, has been turned to the falsehood of heresy, God has removed their candlestick, and turned their light into darkness. Error may make it sick, but so that it may be cured. The churches of Corinth, Galatia, Pergamos had these sicknesses; the Holy Ghost, by Paul and John, prescribes their cures. If they had been dead, what needed any direction of medicine? If they had not been sick, what purpose was there in prescribing a remedy?

To God alone, and to his majestic word, be the impossibility offering? That church, that man, shall in this err palpably, that will challenge an immunity; whosoever thinks he cannot err, does in this very persuasion err extremely. I know there is a man on earth, a man of earth, (to say no more,) that challengeth this privilege. Let him prove it. Nay ask his cardinals, friars, Jesuits. This is somewhat to the proverb, 'Ask the Sons if the father be a thief.' But he cannot err in his definitive sentence of religion. Then belike he has one "spirit in his consistory, and another, at home; and it may in some sort be said of him, as Salinst of Cicero: "He is of one opinion sitting, of another standing." 'Let God be true, but every man a liar.' Rom iii. 4.

What particular church then may not err? Now can it err, and be sound? Be the error small, yet the ache of the finger keeps the body from perfect health. The greater it is, the more dangerous; especially, either when it possesses a vital part, and infects the rulers of the church. It is ill for the feet when the hand is giddy. Or when it is infectious and spreading, violently communicated from one to another. Or when it carries a colour of truth. The most dangerous vice is that which bears the countenance and wears the cloak of virtue. Or when it is fitter to the mood, and seasoned to the relish of the people. Sedition, affectation, popularity, covetousness, are enough to drive an error to a heresy. So the disease may prove a gangrene, and then no means can save the whole, but cutting off the incurable part:

IGNORANCE

Ignorance is a sore sickness in a church, whether it be in the superior or subordinate members; especially when 'the priest's lips preserve not knowledge.' Ill goes it with the body when the eyes are blind. Devotion without instruction often winds itself into superstition. When learning's head is kept under avarice's girdle, the land grows sick. Experience has made this conclusion too clear. Our forefathers felt the terror and tyranny of this affliction; who had golden chalices, and wooden priests, who had either no art or no heart to teach the people. Sing not, thou Roman siren, that ignorance is the dam of devotion, to breed it; it is rather a dam to stifle, restrain, and choke it up. Blindness is plausible to please men, not possible to please God. It is time that our faults in the light are more heinous than theirs who wanted true knowledge. Yet in all reason their sins did exceed in number, who knew not when they went astray, or what was amiss.

Rome has by a strange and incredible kind of doctrine, gone about to prove that the health, which is indeed the sickness of the church, is ignorance. Their Cardinal Cusan saith, that ignorant obedience, lacking reason, is the most absolute and perfect obedience. Chrysostom gives the reason why they so oppose themselves against reason: "Heretical priests shut up the gates of truth; for they know that upon the manifestation of the truth their church would be soon forsaken." If the light, which maketh all things plain, should shine out, then they who before deceived the people could preserve their position no longer, being now smelt out and detected. Hence the people aim at Christ, but either short or far, and not with proper judgement let no man believe other thing of Christ than what Christ would have believed of himself.

But alas! Ignorance is so far from sanity and sanctity, that it is a spilling and killing sickness. Men are urged to read the Scriptures, that never-emptied treasure house of knowledge: they answer, "I am no priest; I have a wife, and a domestical charge to look to." This is that pestilence (no ordinary sickness) that infects to death many souls; to think that knowledge belongs only to priests. This is a work of the devil's inspiration, not suffering us to behold the treasure, lest we grow rich by it.

Beloved, 'let the word of God dwell in you plenteously,' Col. iii. 16. Do not give it a cold entertainment, as you would do to a stranger, and so take your leave of it; but esteem it as your best familiar and bosom friend: making it your chamber-fellow study-fellow, bed-fellow. Let it have the best room and the best bed; the parlour of our conscience, the resting-place in our heart. Neglected things are outside the door, less respected within, but near the door. The more worthy things are not trusted to the safety of one door, but kept under many locks and keys. Give earthly things little regard; preserve them with a more removed care. But this pearl of inestimable value, Matt. xiii. 46, this jewel purer than gold of Ophir, Ps. cxix. 127; lay it not up in the porter's lodge, the outward ear, but in the cabinet and most inward closure of thy heart. Deut. xi. 18, 'Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul.' Mary thought that place the fittest receptacle for such oracles. This is that medicine which can only cure the sickness of ignorance: where the ignorant may find what to learn, the refractory what to fear, the labourer wherewith to be rewarded, the weak nourishment, the guest a banquet, the wounded a remedy to cure him. Be not ignorant, be not sick. 'Search the Scriptures,' read, observe. This is not all. The meat nourishes not which stays not in the stomach. It must be digested by meditation and prayer. Meditation shows our want, prayer procures supply. Let it not be said of our perfunctory reading, as it was of the Delphian oracle, that we disregard what we read. Read to learn, learn to practise, practise to live, and live to praise God for ever.

DISSENSION

A third sickness, which may inwardly afflict a church, is dissension: a sore shaking to the joints, an enervating the strength, and dangerous degree to dissolution. The world being but one, teacheth that there is but one God that governs it; one God, that there is but one church, one truth. The church is not only the pillar of truth, I Tim. iii 15, but also the dove of unity: Cant. vi. 10, 'My dove my undefiled is alone.' Dissensions, like secret and close Judases, have given advantageous means to our common enemies, both to scorn and scourge the church.

I confess, indeed, that unity is no inseparable and undoubted mark of the church; for there was a unity in those murdering voices, 'Crucify him, crucify him!' 'The kings of the earth have banded themselves together against the Lord,' Ps. 11. 2. Those favourers and factors of Antichrist, Rev. xvii, that make war against the Lamb, are all said to 'have one mind.' Nay, Chrysostom says, that it is necessary for the very devils to hearken one another, and to have some mutuality in their very mutiny, a union in their distraction. Yet can it not be denied but that dissension in a church is a sickness to it. It goes ill with the body when the members agree not: those that dwell in one house should be of one mind. It endangers the whole building to ruin, when the stones square and jar one with another. What detriment this has been to whole Christendom, he has no mind that considers not, no heart that condoles not. We may say with the Athenians, "We have strengthened King Philip against us by our own contentions." Christian nation fighting with Christian hath laid more to the possession of the Turk than his own sword. Where is the Greek church, once so famous? Behold, we have laid waste ourselves, who shall

pity us? Our own seditions have betrayed the peace of our Jerusalem. He has no tears of Christian compassion in his eyes that will not shed them at this loss. If you ask the reason why the wild boar has spoiled the vineyard, why the filthy and unclean birds roost themselves in those sanctified dominions, why Mohammed is set up like Dagon, where the ark once stood, and paganism has thrust Christianity out of her seat, it is answered, Israel is not true to Judah; the rending of the ten tribes from the two and the ten miserable.

It is one of the sorest plagues, (oh, rather 'let it fall on the enemies of God and his church! let his own never feel it.) when men shall be 'fed with their own flesh, and shall be drunk with their own blood, as with sweet wine,' Isa. xlix. 26, fighting and fighting one against another, till an utter destruction devour and swallow all. The malignity of this sickness has been terrible to particular churches. They that have been least damaged have little cause to joy in it. The Spanish blades have done less hurt unto us than English tongues. Our contentions have laboured about trifles, our damage has been no trifle; but I know not whether more to our loss or our enemy's gain. Look but on the effects, and you will confess this a dangerous sickness. Rome laughs, Amsterdam insults; while the brethren scuffle in the vineyard, atheists and persecutors shuffle in to spoil all. God's Sabbath, his worship, his gospel is neglected. Some will hear none but the refractory and refusers of conformity; others take advantage of their disobedience to condemn their' ministry. Wicked hearts are hardened, good ones grieved, weak offended. Is this no sickness? Is it unworthy our deploring, our imploring redress?

We are all brethren, both by father's and mother's side. It is more than enough that our failings-out have been a grief to both our parents. If we proceed, the brethren shall suffer for all. Whether we be victors or vanquished, we may destroy ourselves. Let us think we behold our mother calling us to stay our quarrels, and to lay down the cause at her feet. Otherwise, as Jocasta told her two sons, we undertake a war whose victory shall have a sorry triumph. Let every star in our orb know his station, and run his course without erring; the inferior subjecting themselves to the higher powers, whiles the courses of superiors be wisely tempered with moderation and clemency, For, though the office of all God's ministers be common and the same, yet they have different degrees and places. (Calvin). We have adversaries enough at home to move our tongues and pens against. Oh the arguments of steel and iron might supply the weakness of the other! We have the Edomites with their no God, and the Babylonians with their new god; dissolute atheists, resolute Papists: the former scoffing us for believing at all, the latter for believing as we do, as we ought. These oppose (though under the penthouse of night) mass against service, sacrament against sacrament, prayer against prayer; confounding the language, of England, as the Jews once of Israel. Whiles we are praying in one place, 'O Lord God of Abraham,' &c., they are mumbling in another place, 'O Baal, hear us.' Whiles we pray for fire to consume the sacrifice, they for water to consume the fire; we for the, propagation, they for the extirpation of the gospel; hating us and our christian princes more mortally than if we were Saracens. For as no bond is so strong as that of religion, so no hostility is so cruel and outrageous as that which difference in religion occasioneth. Hence they cross, they

curse, they persecute, they excommunicate. Nothing but our blood can ease their stomachs.

We know they hate us; let us the more dearly love one another. The manifestation of enemies should confirm the mutual league and amity of brethren. 'Oh, pray for the peace of Jerusalem!' Pray we that the deceived may find their errors, correct their opinions, and submit their judgments and affections to the rule of truth. Yea, that the wandering sheep, yea, that those who are yet goats may become sheep, and be brought into one fold, under one shepherd. Whiles they continue weeds there is small hope. Yet Paul was once a tare, who after proved good wheat, and is now in the garner of heaven. *Recte dicitur glacielem nivem calidam ease non posse; nullo enim pacto quamdiu nix est, calida esse potest,* — It is truly said that the frozen snow, can by no means be made hot; for so long as it is snow, and frozen, it will not be warmed. Yet if that snow be melted, the liquid may be made hot. God, that is able to turn a stony heart into a heart of flesh, work this change upon them; unite all our hearts to himself, to one another; and heal our souls of this sickness!

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